

A CONSUMER'S GUIDE TO  
**Auto Repair**



DEPARTMENT OF CONSUMER AFFAIRS

**BAR**

Bureau of Automotive Repair

> [www.autorepair.ca.gov](http://www.autorepair.ca.gov) <

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California Department of Consumer Affairs  
Bureau of Automotive Repair  
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## A CONSUMER'S GUIDE TO

# Auto Repair

If you're like most Californians, you depend on your vehicle. When it needs service or repair, you want the work done quickly, correctly, and at a reasonable cost.

By following the tips in this booklet, you can keep your vehicle in good condition and ensure a good working relationship with your auto repair shop.

The information in this guide will also help you understand your rights if you have a problem with a repair shop.

Here's what the Bureau of Automotive Repair (BAR) recommends:

1. Read and follow your owner's manual.
2. Select a repair shop before you need one, but be sure it is registered with BAR.
3. Know your rights as a consumer.
4. Keep this guide in your car and refer to it before taking your car in for service.

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## YOUR OWNER'S MANUAL

Your owner's manual explains what your car's warning indicators mean and what to do if they come on. Paying attention to those indicators can keep small problems from becoming big ones.

Besides warning lights, you should also pay attention to how the car performs as you drive each day. Note anything out of the ordinary and deal with it as soon as possible. Most mechanical problems get worse with time.

Remember that simple and inexpensive procedures like oil changes help your car last longer. Follow the manufacturer's recommended schedule for oil changes and other maintenance to help prevent serious problems. The schedule is in your owner's manual.

If you don't have your car owner's manual, check with your local car dealership or look online for a copy.

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## **SELECT A REPAIR SHOP BEFORE YOU NEED ONE**

Ask family, friends, and co-workers which repair shops they like and why.

Verify that the shop you are considering is registered with BAR, and check to see if there has been any disciplinary action taken against it. Visit **[www.autorepair.ca.gov](http://www.autorepair.ca.gov)** or call **(800) 952-5210**.

Try out a repair shop with a minor maintenance job, such as an oil change. If you're happy with the service you receive, you may have found a shop that's right for you.

Here are some things to consider when selecting a repair shop:

### **BAR Licenses and registrations**

- > Auto repair
- > Smog Check, if applicable
- > Lamp and brake inspections, if applicable

### **Professionalism**

- > Membership in an automotive trade organization
- > Technician certifications

### **Shop appearance**

- > Neat, well-organized service floors.
- > Modern equipment.
- > Clearly posted and easily explained policies on labor charges, guarantees, and accepted methods of payment.



*Remember that simple and inexpensive procedures like oil changes help your car last longer*

## **Personnel**

- > Courteous, helpful staff.
- > A service manager willing and able to answer your questions and resolve disputes.
- > Qualified technicians with professional certifications such as Automotive Service Excellence (ASE) or other advanced training.

## **Guarantees**

- > Ask the service writer if the shop guarantees its work. If so, ask for a copy of the guarantee.

## **Shop specialty**

- > Ask if the shop's technicians regularly work on the make and model of your car or truck, and are comfortable doing the repair you need – especially if your vehicle needs major work.

## **MEETING WITH THE SERVICE WRITER**

Here are steps you should take to make sure you are describing the problem fully. Remember, you know your vehicle better than anyone. When something is wrong, try to pinpoint the symptoms before taking the car in for service.

## **WHAT TO LOOK FOR**

### **Unusual sounds, odors, leaks, warning lights, or smoke.**

Where in the vehicle is the sound coming from?

When does it happen? When the engine is running?

When the engine is cold? When you're accelerating?

Braking? Turning? Going above or at a certain speed?

### **Problems in handling or braking.**

Do you feel vibrations in the steering column or the brake pedal? Does the steering pull to the right or to the left? Are your tires wearing unevenly?

### **Changes in performance.**

Has your engine performance decreased? Is your fuel economy falling? Do you regularly have to add coolant or oil? Are belts or hoses wearing out faster than they should?

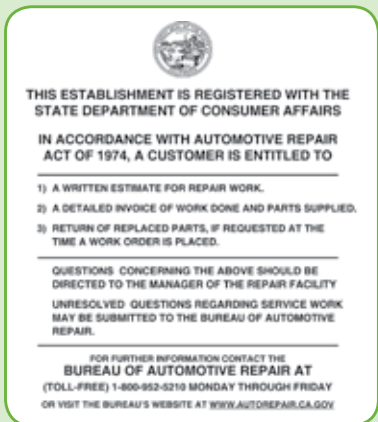
When you explain the problem to the technician or service representative, be as detailed as possible. Don't rush or let yourself be intimidated.

Although the technician or service representative probably can't diagnose your problem on the spot, ask questions. If you don't understand the answers, ask for clarification.

Be sure the repair shop has a phone number where you can be reached. If the technician is going to call you later with a diagnosis, ask when. If you're going to call the shop, be sure you know the number and the best time to call.

## KNOW YOUR RIGHTS AS A CONSUMER

All auto repair shops in California must be registered with the Bureau of Automotive Repair, and every repair shop must post this sign to inform consumers of their rights. If you don't see this sign, ask about it.



## DOING THE PAPERWORK

By law, the auto repair shop must provide a written estimate before doing any work. Ask if there is a charge for the estimate. After you have received the estimate, feel free to go to another shop for a second opinion.

A written estimate must include the total estimated price for parts and labor for a specified repair or service. The estimate does not include sales tax. The estimate must also itemize the parts to be used and the method of repair. The repair shop must stick to the method of repair and the parts listed unless you agree in advance to any changes.



The technician will ask you to sign the estimate/work order, which gives the shop permission to proceed with the work. If you want any replaced parts returned to you, be sure to say so when the technician gives you the estimate.

Before you sign, be sure you understand the work the technician will do. Your signature means you agree to pay for the repairs up to the amount specified. **Do not sign a blank work order.**

Newer cars often need a diagnosis before repairs can be done. A diagnosis uses procedures established by the auto manufacturer to determine the cause of the malfunction. The estimate may cover the cost of the diagnosis alone, or the cost of diagnosis and repair.

If some of the work will be done at a different shop, it must be noted on the written estimate or work order. For example, auto body shops sometimes have auto glass shops replace damaged windshields. If so, the shop must get your permission, unless you cannot reasonably be notified.

## **DIAGNOSIS, THEN REPAIR**

After the technician finishes the diagnosis, the shop will call you to describe the repair work that is needed and to give you the estimated cost of the labor and parts. The shop representative will ask for your permission to do the work as described.

You do not have to give your authorization over the phone, but if you do, the shop must make the following notations:

### **On the invoice**

The name and telephone number of the person who gave the approval, and the date and time it was given. After the repairs are completed, you may be asked to sign or initial the following statement on the final invoice:

*"I acknowledge notice and oral approval of an increase in the original estimated price."*





*Before you sign, be sure you understand the work the technician will do and what it will cost*

Instead of verbal authorization, the shop may use fax or e-mail approval. If so, a copy of your e-mail reply or fax authorizing the repairs and/or cost must be attached to the final invoice.

### **WHEN THE REPAIRS COST MORE THAN THE ESTIMATE**

If the technician later determines that it will take additional work and will cost more to fix your car than the original estimate, someone from the shop must contact you, describe the additional work and cost, and get your permission to proceed.

You may designate someone to authorize additional parts or labor for you. The approval must be noted on the estimate and invoice.

### **TEARDOWN ESTIMATE**

For some complex problems, such as a transmission failure or an auto body repair, the shop may have to take your vehicle apart to give you an accurate estimate. This is called a “teardown.” Be aware that there may be a charge for a teardown, even if you don’t have the vehicle repaired.

A teardown estimate must include the following:

- > Notice that the vehicle may not be able to be re-assembled.
- > The cost, which includes reassembling the vehicle, and replacing gaskets, seals, and other parts destroyed in the teardown.
- > How long it will take the shop to reassemble the vehicle.

After the teardown, the technician must write a revised estimate for the repair that shows:

- > The estimated cost of the parts and labor for the needed repairs.
- > The parts needed for the recommended repairs.

The shop will then contact you for permission to do the

repairs. If you decide not to proceed with the work, the technician must reassemble the vehicle within the cost and within the time stated on the teardown estimate.

## **THE INVOICE**

When the repair job is finished, the shop will give you an invoice, which must include the following:

- > The shop's name, address, and auto repair dealer registration (ARD) number.
- > All work performed, including any work done under warranty at no charge.
- > An itemized list of all parts replaced, indicating any parts that are used, reconditioned, or rebuilt.
- > Labor cost.

## **RETURN OF OLD PARTS**

When you sign the written estimate or work order, you can ask the shop to return to you any parts that were replaced. The shop is required by law to return the parts to you only if you ask for them before the work is done.

If the shop installs a rebuilt part, the old part is usually returned to the supplier as partial payment for the rebuilt part. This payment is called a "core" charge. If you want the old part back, you may have to pay the core charge.

If the shop must return the replaced parts to the supplier under a warranty, you will not be able to get those parts back, but you have a right to see them.

If the shop charges for hazardous waste disposal, the technician or service writer must list the charge and its Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) number on the invoice.

## **GUARANTEES**

A repair shop is not required by law to guarantee its work, but many shops do. A guarantee must include:

- > The name and address of the business making the guarantee.



*If you drop off your car, the repair shop must contact you with an estimate and get your permission before doing any work.*

- > What the guarantee will do (repair or replace the failed part, refund your money, etc.).
- > What you must do to use the guarantee (return the car to the same shop, pay a service charge, etc.).
- > How long the guarantee lasts.
- > What is excluded, if anything.
- > Whether the guarantee is prorated (adjusted for time or mileage).
- > Whether you can transfer the guarantee to the new owner if you sell the vehicle.

## **DROPPING OFF YOUR CAR WHEN THE SHOP IS CLOSED**

If you need to drop off your car when the shop is closed, try to call ahead, so that the service manager knows the car is coming. Make arrangements to leave the car keys in a safe place. Leave a note with your telephone number, describing the repair or service you need. The repair shop must contact you with an estimate and get your permission before doing any work.

## **IF YOU HAVE A PROBLEM**

If you are dissatisfied with the repair work, ask to speak to the service manager. It is often easiest and quickest to resolve the matter directly with the repair shop.

Keep these tips in mind:

- > Know your rights, as defined by the Automotive Repair Act.
- > Remain courteous and calm.
- > Explain the problem accurately, and explain what you think would be a fair settlement.
- > If you are willing to negotiate, say so.
- > If the problem cannot be resolved to your satisfaction, tell the manager you intend to file a complaint with the Bureau of Automotive Repair.

## HOW TO FILE A COMPLAINT

You can file a complaint online at the BAR Web site, **[www.autorepair.ca.gov](http://www.autorepair.ca.gov)**. Or, you can call **(800) 952-5210** to have a complaint form sent to you. Return it to the address listed on the form.

Save all your receipts; they may be helpful when BAR reviews your complaint.

### **Here's what BAR will do when you file a complaint:**

- > Assign a case number to your complaint and notify you within 10 days that BAR received it.
- > Give you the name of the BAR representative who will review your complaint and contact you.

A BAR supervisor will review your complaint to decide if the shop may have violated the Automotive Repair Act or other law.

The BAR representative will try to resolve the matter between you and the repair shop. Although BAR cannot represent you in court, collect money, or levy fines for you, the BAR representative will contact the owner or manager of the shop, describe your complaint, and attempt to negotiate a resolution.

Both parties will be kept informed.

BAR will ask you and the repair shop to confirm the final resolution, and BAR will notify you when the case is closed.

If it appears that the shop may have violated the Automotive Repair Act, the BAR representative will gather documentation (evidence) to decide whether to advise the repair shop manager or open a formal investigation.

Each year, BAR negotiates millions of dollars in rework, refunds, and adjustments for California consumers. If you feel you have a complaint that should be investigated, please contact us.



## FOR MORE INFORMATION

Visit **[www.autorepair.ca.gov](http://www.autorepair.ca.gov)** or call us toll-free at **(800) 952-5210**.

This brochure is available online. You may order printed copies, subject to availability, by calling **(800) 952-5210** or **(916) 574-7370**, or by writing to the Department of Consumer Affairs, Publications, Design & Editing Office, 1625 North Market Blvd., Suite N-112, Sacramento CA 95834.

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STATE OF CALIFORNIA



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